

Your Royal Highness, My Lords Ladies and Gentleman.

It is a great honour for me to speak in this prestigious place.

I would like you tell you how R. A. B. I. has been such an amazing help to me.

About eight years ago I needed an electric wheelchair - years of heavy work has left me with spondylitis of the spine and arthritis. The wheelchair is my legs but costs a lot more than shoes! Against my will I was persuaded to ring R. A. B. I.

To start with I was visited by a welfare officer who checked that between my late husband and myself we met the requirements to be beneficiaries.

Then it all happened. My welfare officer discreetly checked I was receiving all the right state benefits and she even got my council tax reduced.

Then came help with my telephone bill and financial gifts, wonderful hampers at Christmas and birthdays. I was overcome with it all.

Next a holiday in Wales, so much TLC and fun, we even went down a coal mine, listened to a male voice choir and Trish – the head of welfare – who always looks after us so well, persuaded me to go, very reluctantly, into a swimming pool. I am still a regular swimmer - it is such good therapy.

Several years later, a holiday in Babbacombe, Devon. Again, things I would never do alone, visiting Dartmoor to see the ponies, Buckfast Abbey, a train ride, wheelchair dancing, the list is endless.

I was in the Women's Land Army working on a dairy farm in Sussex for £1.50 a week. I remember a really bad winter in 1947 mucking out and feeding stock in the snow, all jolly hard work, but we loved it. I carried on working in agriculture, which my husband had done since he was 14 years old. He used to watch me over the fence while cutting cauliflowers. My landlady took pity on him and told him to go to the village dance on New Year's Eve - the rest is history. We married in 1950, the papers said "land girl meets romance at Westham."

Sadly after several relapses with multiple sclerosis he had to give up work in his 40s and passed away in 1994. I nursed him for 23 years - if only we had known about R. A. B. I. then.

I receive a regular visit from Kate to make sure all is well and I am coping. Not once do I feel patronized. It makes you feel a worthwhile person.

It is amazing that this has been going on for 150 years. We - the beneficiaries - have to thank those who work and give so generously to R. A. B. I.

May you carry on this good work for many years, the world is a better place for people like you.